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RUEHKUK RUEHLH RUEHPW RUEHROV
DE RUEHJA #1527/01 2250511
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 120511Z AUG 08
FM AMEMBASSY JAKARTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9770
INFO RUEHXS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 5289
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 2889
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 1191
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 1160
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2095
RUEHPB/AMEMBASSY PORT MORESBY 3908
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2351
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 2938
RUEHHK/AMCONSUL HONG KONG 2874
RUEHPT/AMCONSUL PERTH 1031
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHHJJPI/USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 JAKARTA 001527

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP, EAP/MTS, EAP/MLS, DRL, DRL/AWH, DRL/IRF,
EAP/PD
NSC FOR E. PHU

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [ID](#)

SUBJECT: VISIT BY NOTED U.S. SCHOLAR PLACES ACCENT ON
OUTREACH TO INDONESIAN MUSLIMS

REF: JAKARTA 1070 AND PREVIOUS

JAKARTA 00001527 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. Key Indonesian Muslim leaders joined noted U.S. scholar on Islam John Esposito for the August 10 launch of the translated version of his 2008 book, "Who Speaks for Islam?" The discussion focused on how Indonesian Muslims--the largest community of Muslims in the world with roughly 200 million adherents--can make their largely moderate views better heard on the international stage. The leaders also expressed strong interest in increasing understanding with the U.S. Esposito is widely known in Indonesia and his visit underscored the importance of continued outreach to the Indonesian Muslim community. END SUMMARY.

VISIT BY NOTED EXPERT

¶2. (U) A noted U.S. scholar on Islam recently visited Jakarta. John Esposito, Professor of Religion and Islamic studies at Georgetown University, spoke at the August 10 launch of the Indonesian-language version of his book, "Who Speaks for Islam: What a Billion Muslims Really Think" by an Indonesian publisher. The Bahasa Indonesia title translates into English as, "It's Time for Muslims to Speak Out." Esposito's visit was privately financed and not USG-linked. (Note: Esposito was among the earliest American Islamic studies scholars to come to Indonesia when he first visited in 1975 as a USG-sponsored speaker.)

¶3. (U) The audience of over 100 at the event included many prominent Muslim scholars and leaders. The Master of Ceremonies was Abdillah Toha, a well-known member of the national legislature. (Note: Toha recently visited the U.S. on a USG-funded visit.) In addition to Esposito, the panel included: Din Syamsuddin, chair of Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's second largest Muslim organization with about 35 million members; Anies Baswedan, Rector of Paramadina University, a

moderate Muslim school; and, respected scholar Dr. Mochtar Pabottingi of the Indonesian Institute for Social Sciences. DepPol/C and Library of Congress representative also attended the event.

A CONSTRUCTIVE DISCUSSION

14. (U) During his talk, Esposito summarized the findings of recent Gallup research--done over six years and involving more than 50,000 interviews. His main point was that the survey revealed that 93 percent of Muslims are moderate, based mostly on their view that the September 11 attack was not justifiable. U.S. foreign policy needs to focus on the 7 percent of radicals, he said. This group is mostly better educated and has stronger belief in democracy than mainstream Muslims in general, but are highly cynical toward the West and about whether democracy can be realized. Esposito said the study revealed that the world's Muslims do not hate Americans, but do not like our foreign policy, and are able to distinguish between the two.

15. (U) The panelists and audience praised the Gallup study for offering an honest and empathetic take on Muslim views, and for the fact that it included Indonesia. The overall discussion was constructive, emphasizing how the U.S. and the Muslim world can avoid a "clash of civilizations" and find common understanding. In response to some comments, Esposito offered a frank rebuff to negative stereotypes of the U.S., saying it is patently wrong to say the U.S. is less spiritual than Muslim nations, for example.

MUSLIM LEADER: FOCUS ON COMMON GOALS

16. (U) In his remarks, Muhammadiyah head Din Syamsuddin

JAKARTA 00001527 002.2 OF 002

politely criticized U.S. foreign policy but then added that in his recent meeting with U/S Glassman in Washington, Syamsuddin had emphasized that the Muslim world should be seen as a partner rather than a threat. Syamsuddin said, "Let's fight common enemies--poverty and economic injustice." Paramadina University Rector Baswedan said he was studying for his doctorate at Northern Illinois University when September 11 occurred, and he was surprised by the relatively few retaliatory acts of violence against Muslims in the U.S. (Note: Baswedan also got his masters at University of Maryland under a Fulbright Scholarship.)

17. (U) The discussion also focused on how Indonesian Muslims--the largest community of Muslims in the world with roughly 200 million adherents--can make their largely moderate views better heard on the international stage. Asked for his major criticisms of the Muslim world, Esposito commented that oftentimes the educational sophistication of college-educated Muslims is not matched by increased understanding of religious values, and thus they can be easily influenced in a negative way. Muslims also, he claimed, overemphasize their own sense of being victimized and lack of power. He cited what he calls the "Muslim couch potato" who takes no action to right misperceptions. He posed the rhetorical questions of how many Muslims have studied in the West and tried to understand the culture, or how many Muslim universities have American studies programs. Very few, Esposito asserted.

OUTREACH KEY

18. (U) Esposito's visit--which was not USG-linked--underscored the importance of people-to-people outreach. He is well known here, and many Indonesians lined up to ask him about ways to establish academic and religious exchanges with the U.S. As he was among the first wave of U.S. scholars of Islam to visit Indonesia under United States Information Agency speaker programs and one who visited often in the 1970s and 1980s, Esposito understands the value of long-term people-to-people exchanges. He commented that

outreach and public diplomacy are the most important types of diplomacy that the U.S. can carry out in the Muslim world and the goodwill his brief visit engendered bore this out.

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